



# Gender differences in the professional experiences of Iran specialists in American academia

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## Abstract

The work on gender differences in academic life spans a wide array of colleges and universities, scholarly disciplines, and countries. Using a survey conducted in 2016 to capture “the state of the field” in Iranian Studies as US–Iran relations were in a brief thaw, this paper draws on some of these perspectives and explores gender differences in the professional experiences of Iranian Studies scholars working in the USA. Iranian Studies has grown and diversified in the USA since the 1960s. This expansion occurred despite disruptions in Iran itself and in US–Iranian relations since 1979, with many US-based Iran specialists having heritage connections to Iran. The survey, which is the first of its kind conducted among this particular academic community, covered a range of topics related to respondents’ academic and professional experiences, career outlook, and political activities. The results spotlight some notable differences—statistically significant differences in several cases—in the professional experiences of men and women in this academic field. Women respondents were more likely to be of junior rank or graduate students and were more likely than men to feel that gender identity influenced their professional milestones. Women were more likely to list the desire for social impact as a professional motivation than men. Women tended to feel less sanguine about the state of their careers, their professional environment, their career prospects, and the state of the Iranian Studies field as a whole. Some of these attitudes varied depending on their self-identification as Iranian, Iranian-American or American, while some held true across self-identification. These results mostly confirmed expectations based on similar research discussed in our literature review.

**Keywords** Iranian Studies · Iranian-American · Gender · Academia · Survey

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## Introduction

An important body of research describes and explains differences in the professional experiences of women and men in academia. Some studies focus on discrepancies in hiring, salary, promotion, and tenure (Barbezat and Hughes 2005; Burke et al. 2005; Crothers, et al. 2010; Ginther and Hayes 2003; Webber and Canche 2015, 2018). Other work investigates different aspects of job satisfaction, such as work environment, relations with colleagues, and work-life balance (Berheide et al. 2020; Hesli and Lee 2013; Lapierre and Allen 2006; Machado-Taylor et al. 2014; Okpara et al. 2005; Webber and Rogers 2018). Research has also examined contrasts in professional socialization and aspiration (Angervall et al. 2018; Evers and Sieverding 2015). The work on gender differences in academic life spans an array of academic settings: from large research universities to small liberal arts colleges; from STEM fields to the humanities and social sciences; and in multiple countries.

This paper draws on some of these perspectives and explores gender differences in the professional experiences of Iranian Studies scholars working in the USA. This study is based on a survey of Iranian Studies specialists conducted in late 2016. It is important to note that the intent of the survey was not simply to capture attitudes in response to a particular set of circumstances at that time but also to measure attitudes regarding cumulative professional experiences that played out over years to that point. As we discuss in both the literature review and analysis of results, the circumstances of late 2016 were relevant, but professional attitudes should also be put in the context of different forms of social identity and setting (ethnicity, class, gender, religion, education, family circumstances, institutions of higher learning).

## Research agenda

The analyses that follow will spotlight four sets of professional experiences and research questions. In some cases, we expect to see clear distinctions in the responses provided by men and women. In other cases, we expect gender differences to be modest, if not negligible.

## Gender and professional profile

Iranian Studies cover a wide range of disciplines and academic specialties, and the scholarly focus of Iranian Studies has shifted over time, in response to changes in scholarly approaches and political developments involving Iran and US–Iran relations (Marandi and Tari 2018; Tari 2015). We know of no studies that have directly explored gender differences in the professional socialization and research concentrations in Iranian Studies specifically, though differences have been observed in Middle East Studies more broadly. One manifestation of this might show up in the research focus reported by men and women in Iranian Studies. We provide a descriptive profile of men and women in terms of research focus and stage of career.

To the extent that men and women have responded to differently to changing currents in other academic fields, it would not be surprising to see a similar pattern in Iranian Studies.

### **Gender and professional/academic milestones**

We asked respondents to offer views about the influence of gender on professional milestones such as obtaining an academic appointment, salary, and promotion. Studies from other academic disciplines consistently point to gender differences in these milestones, whether measured objectively (e.g., salary data) or by way of respondents' subjective judgments. We expect our results, which are based on subjective judgments, to confirm previous research. That is, we expect to observe notable gender differences in perceptions about professional milestones.

### **Gender and professional satisfaction/professional outlook**

A related line of inquiry focuses on gender differences in more overall expressions of professional satisfaction and assessments of Iranian Studies as an academic field. These judgments are less rooted in respondents' personal professional experiences and are more reflective of their appraisals of professional environment. Based on previous research, we should expect some discernable gender differences, with women generally less satisfied with their professional settings. At the same time, the field of Iranian Studies has faced the challenges of academic standing and material support faced by other areas studies fields. In the case of Iranian Studies, these challenges are potentially salient enough to transcend gender lines and temper gender differences in survey responses.

### **Gender and motivations for research**

Earlier studies of Middle East scholars uncovered an important political consciousness among women, one that set them apart from their male colleagues and one that animated their research interests. We might expect to see a similar pattern in the related community of Iranian Studies specialists. But as previously noted, the present study was conducted in the midst of the 2016 presidential election. It is reasonable to expect that Donald Trump's aggressive rhetoric, some of which specifically targeted Iran and Iranians, would touch a nerve with Iranian Studies scholars across the board, men, and women alike.

Iranian Studies has grown and diversified in the USA since the 1960s, when efforts began to develop the field under the auspices of several academic societies (incorporated as non-profits). The growth and diversity relate not just to the range of subfields that have joined the "classic" fields of history, literature, and language, but also the demographics of the field. More women and "region-related" scholars are visible at institutions and in the scholarly canon. This expansion occurred despite disruptions in Iran itself and in US–Iranian relations since 1979, with many US-based Iran specialists—in all career stages—having heritage connections to Iran.

Moreover, the administration of the survey itself coincided with the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and its immediate aftermath, defined by hardline rhetoric on immigration, the Muslim travel ban, and a burgeoning anti-Trump “resistance” movement (Meyer and Tarrow 2018). We wanted to understand how these conditions and trends might have shaped the professional experiences and outlooks of this distinct scholarly community. Accordingly, the survey, which is the first to focus on Iranian Studies as a subfield, covered a range of topics related to respondents’ academic and professional experiences, career outlook, and political activities. The results spotlight some notable differences—statistically significant differences in several cases—in the professional experiences of men and women in this academic field.

## Literature review

The process of interpreting our survey data involves finding appropriate points of reference. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research about the development and state of Iranian Studies as an academic field (For exceptions, see Marandi and Tari 2018; Tari 2015). But there is a rich body of such work on Middle Eastern studies. We have drawn on some of that literature in the development of our own research expectations and in the interpretation of our survey findings. In particular, we draw on Deeb and Winegar’s important study of anthropologists in Middle Eastern and North African Studies (MENA), *Anthropology’s Politics* (2015). Although Deeb and Winegar are looking at MENA more generally and anthropology more specifically, some of their results speak to gender differences in the academic and professional experiences of men and women in the field. To that extent, Deeb and Winegar provide a relevant and rigorous point of comparison. There are other important studies of Middle East Studies (Amanat and Bernhardsson 2007; Khalil 2008, 2014, 2016; Lockman 2005, 2007, 2016) and Iranian Studies (Foster 2007; Shannon 2017, 2018), but these focus on the connections between foreign policy and academia (including the institutional history of area studies programs), not the experiences of a category of scholars within American academia. Indeed, one reviewer of Lockman’s 2016 book noted the conspicuous absence of both women and region-related names from his account of the rise of Middle East Studies, less as a criticism of Lockman than as a recognition of the fact that the field in the USA was largely shaped by “Ivy League-educated, well-off, Protestant elite men (Miller-Idriss 2018, 715).”

Deeb and Winegar, by contrast, were grappling with the diversification of the cohorts of anthropologists working on the Arab World in more recent years. This has some resonance with our results. For example, women in our Iranian Studies survey are more likely than men to be graduate students, non-tenured, assistant professors, and associate professors. This has been observed in other contexts within the broader field of Middle East and North African (MENA) Studies and many fields in academia. In *Anthropology’s Politics: Disciplining the Middle East* (2015), Deeb and Winegar report that women’s presence in the field only began to rise circa 1990 and stood at 61% (much higher than MENA as a whole or Iranian Studies). In MENA, some 40% of scholars were “region-related” (i.e., had heritage connections to the Middle East). Their explanatory notes indicate further that 42.1% of women in

MENA were likely to be employed as “contingent faculty” working at more than one institution (Deeb and Winegar, 7, 8, and, 207, n17). The balance of “region-related” specialists and non-tenured/junior faculty in Iranian Studies is different in our survey results compared to MENA as a whole. Roughly two-thirds of Iranian-American Iran specialists identified as Iranian or Iranian-American in our survey. If you combine the categories of adjunct, assistant professor, “academic staff,” and “other” in our survey, 34% of men and 33% of might be considered “contingent faculty.” If you pull out tenure-stream assistant professors, those numbers are 10% and 17.2%, respectively. This suggests that, compared to colleagues in MENA generally, Iranian Studies scholars are less likely to be outside of coveted tenure-stream opportunities within academia. At the same time, gender-based differences exist and, as we shall see, these are even more pronounced among graduate students and tenured faculty.

Looking more broadly at questions of gender equity in academia, research has made clear the persistent and considerable gender gaps in salary (Barbezat and Hughes 2005; Crothers et al. 2010; Webber and Canche 2015, 2018). These salary discrepancies are manifested in academics’ assessments of job satisfaction; although women express higher levels of satisfaction with their work and colleagues, men tend to be more satisfied with their pay and promotions (Okpara et al. 2005; Webber and Rogers 2018). Furthermore, the kind of institution where one works—research vs. teaching intensive—does not seem to provide a better experience of “work-life” balance from the perspective of women faculty in both settings (Berheide et al. 2020; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2017; Webber and Rogers 2018).

Other studies have explored how student evaluations and even ostensibly gender-neutral policies, such as family leave, can have adverse impacts on women in American academia (Antecol et al. 2018; Boring 2017; Chávez and Mitchell 2020; MacNeill et al. 2015; Winslow 2010). So, an interesting question is whether women Iranian Studies in American academic have experiences that track with women in American academia generally (Toutkoushian et al. 2007) or in MENA, more specifically.

Our survey provides us with a useful initial look at the intersection of ethnicity and gender among “region-related” faculty in the field of Iranian Studies. Being region related, of course, runs along a spectrum that includes those perceived as “foreign” (and perhaps perceive themselves that way) in an American context (Skachkova 2007; Dedoussis 2007; Lin et al. 2009). Although the questionnaire was not wholly focused on these questions and was more broadly based in design, differences in attitudes based on gender and ethnic identity came into view in our results. There is, of course, a growing body of literature on Iranian-Americans, most of which considers specific geographical contexts (Amin 2017; Chaichian 1997; Hanassab 1998; Honey 1978; Mobasher 2012), major demographic trends (Bozorgmehr 1998; Bozorgmehr and Ketcham 2018; Elahi 2006 and 2008; Foltz 2009; Higgins 2004; Lotfalian 2009; Mahdi 1998; Modarres 1998; Ronaghy et al. 1976) and the intersection of culture and identity (Amine 2018; Bennett 2008; Darznik 2010; Hoffman 1989a, 1989b, Karim and Khorrami 1999; Karim 2006; Maghbouleh 2018; Malek 2006; Mostofi 2003; Motlagh 2008). Our project is the first to focus on the community of scholars that would include those working on Iranian-Americans or Iranians in the diaspora.

## Methodology

Iranian Studies scholars constitute a “low incidence population” (Berry et al. 2018). It is a small community of academics, difficult to locate with sampling procedures developed for general population surveys. So, a critical task for our survey was to identify and contact the appropriate pool of respondents. We employed a “list sampling” approach in which a targeted list of individuals was assembled from multiple sources (Berry et al. 2018). This was complicated by the fact that Iranian Studies is a broad interdisciplinary field without clear boundaries; we ultimately contacted scholars from disciplines ranging from history to literature to political economy to cinema studies. Very few colleges and universities have dedicated Iranian Studies or Persian Studies departments, programs, or centers. Middle Eastern Studies and Arab-American Studies programs, while more common, are a less than perfect fit with the scope of Iranian Studies as an academic field. These circumstances made it more difficult to determine just who should be contacted and invited to participate in the survey.

We addressed this by assembling a list that drew mainly from three databases. Two key sources were the membership directories for the Middle East Studies Association and the Association for Iranian Studies; from these lists we selected individuals whose subfields/specialties appeared to fit a broad conception of Iranian Studies. These searches were supplemented by a search in JSTOR for peer-reviewed publications since 2000 that appeared to fall into the realm of Iranian Studies; the authors of those articles were added to the list. The lists were crosschecked to avoid duplicate names. This effort produced a roster of 262 Iranian Studies specialists in U.S. academia. We included all academic ranks from advanced graduate students to emeritus professors. Because Iranian Studies is a small scholarly community and because the assembled list had only 262 people, we did not draw a sample from this pool. Rather, we attempted to obtain information from the entire group.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that we did not presume the social identity of the scholars we contacted based on their name or any other factor. Our survey asked individuals to sort themselves initially by the categories Iranian, Iranian-American, American, or Other. As expected, a small group of respondents selected “Other” and shared (via text box) how they identified (e.g., Canadian, Japanese). Those respondents are not included in the results we present here. Respondents were also asked about the other ethnicities with which they identified (both those common in Iran and the wide range of possibilities in the USA), again with a “text box” option for “Other.” Additionally, we asked what religious traditions they were raised in and held to now. Our question on gender identification was non-binary and included a “prefer not answer” option. Only one person did not identify as male or female (selecting, the “prefer not to answer” option). Although this was not a priority for our research, it is interesting to note that breakdown of sub-ethnicities and religious identifications among our

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<sup>1</sup> A similar list sampling approach was taken in a 2013 survey of Iranian-American physicians in California. In that study, respondents were identified from several medical directories and professional association membership lists (Rashidian et al. 2016).

respondents were very similar to those in national surveys of Iranian-Americans and in Iranian census data.

We initially contacted the respondent pool via regular mail in September 2016. A brief letter was sent explaining the purpose and content of the study.<sup>2</sup> We then followed up with a series of emails with links to a survey distributed via Qualtrics in October 2016. The survey window was opened in late October 2016, just ahead of the Middle East Studies Association Conference in November. The survey remained open until early December with two sets of reminder emails sent before the survey was closed. As an incentive for opening and completing the survey, people were offered a chance to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards. Of the 262 individuals contacted, 109 opened the survey and 99 completed it. This yielded a response rate of 37.8%, a rate that is firmly in line with web surveys of this kind (Tourangeau et al. 2013). Nonetheless, a respondent pool of only 99 individuals means that the analyses that follow are largely descriptive in nature, as not all comparisons attain traditional levels of statistical significance. Again, there were some respondents who did not consider themselves primarily Iranian, Iranian-American, or American. Therefore, in some tables that analyze those distinctions among Iranian specialists in American US academic settings, *n* will be lower than 99.

The questionnaire consisted of 46 questions seeking information on professional life in academia, education history, social identity, and attitudes toward the field of Iranian Studies, political activity, as well as some basic demographic questions. Most of the survey questions used a closed-ended format with predetermined sets of response options, although respondents were occasionally provided invited to provide open-ended comments to elaborate on their answers (some of which we share in our analysis below). The complete survey questions used in this paper are included in Appendix A.

## Results

Our analysis of the survey data addresses several dimensions of gender differences in professional experiences. First, we present a basic profile of men and women in Iranian Studies, covering areas of study, academic rank, involvement in professional associations, and academic leadership. Second, we examine how men and women see gender identity as an influence in professional milestones, such as admission to graduate study and obtaining an academic position. Third, we discuss gender differences in more general assessments of professional satisfaction and the state of Iranian Studies as a field. Fourth, we consider gender contrasts in motivations for pursuing graduate study in Iranian Studies and the contours of their current research agendas. We close with a short overview of personal information which also highlight some differences based on gender.

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<sup>2</sup> Experiments conducted in conjunction with surveys of faculty have shown that initial hardcopy mail contact can improve response rate as much as 10% over surveys that rely only on email contact (Tourangeau et al. 2013).

**Table 1** Fields that best describe the research you do now...

| Field               | Men   | Women |
|---------------------|-------|-------|
| Iranian History     | 70.0% | 50.0% |
| Literature          | 26.0% | 25.0% |
| Language            | 12.0% | 19.4% |
| Middle East Studies | 38.0% | 22.2% |
| Iranian Studies     | 44.0% | 22.2% |
| Social Sciences     | 28.0% | 19.4% |
| Gender Studies      | 4.0%  | 38.9% |
| Religious Studies   | 10.0% | 11.1% |
| Art/Music/Media     | 6.0%  | 19.4% |
| Other               | 10.0% | 2.8%  |
| (n)                 | (50)  | (36)  |

Respondents could select more than one field, so percentages in each column will not add up to 100%

$p \leq .01$

The analyses discussed here are basic crosstabulations that display contrasts in survey responses between men and women. Statistical significance of gender differences was determined by way of chi-square tests of independence. Attendant  $p$ -values are included in tables where results met standards thresholds of statistical significance ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

### Gender and professional profile

Our survey confirmed that there is a wide array of fields represented in Iranian Studies, ranging from history, literature, and language to the social sciences, art, and music. We asked respondents to list the fields that best describe their current research. The questionnaire included an extensive list of possible fields, and we invited people to provide their own descriptions if the list did not include their field. Respondents could mention more than one field, so the percentages in Table 1 do not add up to 100%. A third of our respondents mentioned only one field, but most mentioned two, three, or four fields, and one individual listed nine different fields under the overall Iranian Studies umbrella.

In Table 1, we break down the research backgrounds reported by men and women in our sample. The contrasts between men and women are more pronounced in some subfields more than others, but the overall gender differences shown in Table 1 are statistically significant. Iranian history is the most frequently mentioned subfield by both men and women, though a larger proportion of men (70%) list history compared to women (50%). Men are more likely than are women to mention area studies—Middle Eastern Studies or Iranian Studies—as a field. By contrast, women are much more likely than are men to mention gender studies as a subfield; 38.9% of women listed gender studies, making it the second most frequently listed subfield among women. Almost a fifth of women (19.4%) of women list a concentration in art/music media, compared to only 6% of men. Because the women in the sample



**Table 2** Academic rank by gender

| Rank               | Men   | Women |
|--------------------|-------|-------|
| Adjunct            | 8.0%  | 2.9%  |
| Assistant Prof     | 24.0% | 14.3% |
| Associate Prof     | 16.0% | 37.1% |
| Full Prof          | 36.0% | 8.6%  |
| Academic Staff     | –     | 2.9%  |
| Grad Instructor/TA | 6.0%  | 20.0% |
| Other              | 2.0%  | 11.4% |
| Retired            | 8.0%  | 2.9%  |
| (n)                | (50)  | (35)  |

$p \leq .01$

tend to be younger and at earlier stages in their careers, the gender differences in subfield choices may portend shifts in the focus of Iranian Studies in the coming years. What is important to note is that three years after this survey was complete, over 100 scholars petitioned the Association for Iranian Studies to enact a Diversity and Inclusion Policy with particular focus on the composition of AIS conference panels to achieve more gender diversity. On May 29th, 2019, the AIS Council adopted this policy and applied it to the 2020 conference planning process.<sup>3</sup> The demand for this policy change was clearly anticipated in the results of our survey data.

Studies of gender effects on salaries and promotion in academia often find it difficult to statistically disentangle the impact of gender and seniority/academic rank. Our sample is also defined by a discernable overlap between gender and academic rank. The contrasts are shown in Table 2. Although similar percentages of men (76%) and women (70%) hold tenure-stream positions, over a third of men (36%) are full professors, compared to less than a tenth (8.6%) of women in the sample. One in five women are graduate students, compared to only 6% of men. The different distributions of academic rank for men and women are statistically significant.

As might be expected, not having a tenure-stream position can impact one's professional experience and outlook even when key professional milestones in research or campus leadership are achieved. One female respondent shared this comment, "As a non-tenure track associate professor on a long-term contract, my position is tenuous. Whenever I have directed... the college's interdisciplinary programs, my views are generally respected (by colleagues and administrators) and I have had major impact on programming at the college during those periods. Otherwise, my views and role are marginalized despite my professional activities and publications. I am the only person doing Iranian Studies at my institution and the marginality of my position reflects the (lack of) importance given to this field of study." This

<sup>3</sup> See "Diversity and Inclusiveness Policy," *About AIS* at <https://associationforiranianstudies.org/about> (accessed on January 13, 2021).

comment underscores the variety of factors that can shape one's attitudes toward their professional experiences and how one's sense of agency and inclusion can vary significantly over the course a person's career. Furthermore, it suggests that one's local institutional experience is in dialogue with one's field. Our remaining tables explore how these factors contribute to the different experiences of men and women in Iranian Studies in American academia.

## Gender and professional milestones

The questionnaire featured a series of items in which respondents were asked if gender identity had influenced a set of professional milestones, such as acceptance to graduate school, obtaining an academic position, salary, promotion, and opportunities for academic leadership. Respondents were asked if gender identity had influenced these milestones a great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, or none at all. Table 3 summarizes the perceptions of male and female respondents across seven different milestones.

In every case, there are notable differences in the perceptions voiced by men and women. Men rarely state that gender identity has a great deal or a lot of influence, and over 60%-80% of men see gender identity having no influence at all. Women are much less likely to say that gender identity has no influence, and for several milestones, they feel that gender identity has a great deal or a lot of influence.

Stark gender differences can be seen in an early professional milestone, acceptance to graduate school (Table 3A). Over 40% of women felt that gender identity had at least a moderate amount of influence, while only about 6% of men shared that judgment. At the same time, nearly eight in ten men (79.2%) thought that gender identity had no influence at all, nearly double the percentage of women (41.9%) with a similar view.

Men and women also differed significantly in their perceptions of the influence of gender identity on obtaining an academic position (Table 3C). About a quarter of women felt that gender identity had a great deal or a lot of influence. Not a single male respondent shared that perception. By contrast, 64.6% of men thought that gender identity had no influence at all, compared to 36.7% of women.

A similar pattern is found in perceptions regarding the influence of gender identity on salary at time of hire (Table 3D). Over 25% of women stated that gender identity had a great deal or a lot of influence compared to only 4% of men. Seven in ten men saw no gender influence at all on initial salaries, a view expressed by only about half the women in the sample. This result is particularly interesting in the way it dovetails with other studies of gender gaps in academic salaries, as well as some research on salary compression. Although direct gender effects on salary compression were hard to isolate statistically in one study (Burke et al. 2005), the authors did acknowledge an impact of gender of initial salary levels. It is telling, but perhaps not surprising, that female academicians are aware of this condition in a way that men are not.

The contrasting perceptions of male and female Iranian Studies scholars extends to the remaining professional milestones in Table 3—promotion, academic

**Table 3** Gender identity influences professional milestones?

| [A] Acceptance to grad school** | Men   | Women |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Great Deal                      | –     | –     |
| A Lot                           | –     | 9.7%  |
| Moderate Amount                 | 6.3%  | 32.3% |
| A Little                        | 14.6% | 16.1% |
| None at All                     | 79.2% | 41.9% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                    | (48)  | (31)  |
| [B] Funding in grad school*     | Men   | Women |
| Great Deal                      | –     | –     |
| A Lot                           | –     | 6.9%  |
| Moderate Amount                 | 6.3%  | 24.1% |
| A Little                        | 10.4% | 17.2% |
| None at All                     | 83.3% | 51.7% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                    | (48)  | (29)  |
| [C] Obtain academic position**  | Men   | Women |
| Great Deal                      | –     | 3.3%  |
| A Lot                           | –     | 23.3% |
| Moderate Amount                 | 16.7% | 20.0% |
| A Little                        | 18.8% | 16.7% |
| None at All                     | 64.6% | 36.7% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                    | (48)  | (30)  |
| [D] Salary time of hire*        | Men   | Women |
| Great Deal                      | –     | 10.0% |
| A Lot                           | 4.2%  | 16.7% |
| Moderate Amount                 | 12.5% | 13.3% |
| A Little                        | 12.5% | 6.7%  |
| None at All                     | 70.8% | 53.3% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                    | (48)  | (30)  |
| [E] Promotion**                 | Men   | Women |
| Great Deal                      | –     | 13.8% |
| A Lot                           | –     | 10.3% |
| Moderate Amount                 | 4.3%  | 10.3% |
| A Little                        | 8.7%  | 10.3% |
| None at All                     | 87.0% | 55.2% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                    | (46)  | (29)  |
| [F] Academic leadership         | Men   | Women |
| Great Deal                      | –     | 3.3%  |
| A Lot                           | 4.3%  | 20.0% |
| Moderate Amount                 | 8.7%  | 10.0% |
| A Little                        | 19.6% | 20.0% |

**Table 3** (continued)

| [F] Academic leadership | Men   | Women |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| None at All             | 67.4% | 46.7% |
| ( <i>n</i> )            | (46)  | (30)  |
| [G] Ability to publish* | Men   | Women |
| Great Deal              | –     | –     |
| A Lot                   | 4.3%  | 16.1% |
| Moderate Amount         | 2.2%  | 12.9% |
| A Little                | 10.9% | 12.9% |
| None at All             | 82.6% | 58.1% |
| ( <i>n</i> )            | (46)  | (31)  |

\* $p \leq .05$ \*\* $p \leq .01$ 

leadership, and ability to publish. In the case of promotion (Table 3E) close to 90% of men felt that gender identity had no influence at all, and none of the men in the sample saw that gender identity might have a great deal or a lot of influence. Women, on the other hand were less likely (55.2%) to say that gender identity had no influence at all, while almost a quarter (24.1%) of women stated that gender identity had a great deal or a lot of influence.

A similar proportion of women (23.3%) also see gender identity as having a great deal or a lot of influence on opportunities for academic leadership (Table 3F). Again, in stark contrast, two-thirds of men (67.4%) see gender identity having no influence at all. It happens to be the case in our sample that women are less likely than are men (although the differences are not statistically significant) to hold/have held positions of academic leadership. Although this could be attributed, in part, to more seniority among men, it is clear that women in our sample do appear to have a different view of the professional climate for leadership opportunities.

Finally, men and women differ in their judgments about the influence of gender identity on the ability to publish (Table 3G). Both men and women generally see gender identity as having minimal influence, although men are still much more likely than are women to observe that there is not influence at all (82.6% of men vs. 58.1% of women). Only about 6% of men state that gender identity might have moderate or a lot of influence, a judgment offered by 29% of women. These distinct sets of perceptions have a parallel in other research that finds women in academia often pursuing (and being socialized to pursue) careers in teaching intensive colleges and universities, where the atmosphere for research and publishing can be quite challenging (Berheide et al. 2020; Webber and Rogers 2018).

One of the interesting areas of “pushback” from our respondents in the comment section had to do with our questions that attempted to isolate the influence of social identity of professional milestones. One woman respondent opined, “I have no idea how these factors influence people who are in a position to hire or promote me. That is something you would have to ask them.” There is an interesting implication here:

why should Iran specialists (of any background) have to account for the biases of others? They should not, of course. But our survey was seeking to understand, in the most open-ended way possible, if Iran specialists perceived any bias against them in their professional lives. Another woman respondent wanted to underscore the effort she made to *separate* her personal identity as “an Iranian woman” from her professional identity, “I try to comment on what I actually now about, instead of turning my presumed identity into a speaker position.” Wherever these individual respondents are located in the larger pattern of responses, these comments suggest that it is something that they have to navigate even if they do not want to.

## Gender and professional satisfaction

An important component of our questionnaire was a set of items that invited respondents to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various elements of professional well-being. One question focused on Iranian Studies as a field, while three other questions dealt primarily with respondents’ personal professional satisfaction. All of these survey questions used a five-point response scale running from very satisfied through very dissatisfied. Table 4 presents breakdowns by gender. Overall, gender differences are modest, and never reach standard thresholds of statistical significance. As such, these results provide an interesting contrast to the gender differences found in views about professional milestones. The two sets of survey questions cover some similar territory, but in different ways. The milestone items refer to some specific stages and issues in academic life, while the satisfaction items are more general. The milestone questions also directly ask respondents to think about gender identity as a possible influence. The satisfaction questions offer less clearly defined cues. The differing formats and orientations of the survey questions can help discern how and when gender might be associated with perceptions of professional experiences.

The data in Table 4A–C show that quite high percentages of both men and women state that they are either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the state of their careers right now, prospects for their professional future, and the professional environment where they work. Women are a bit more likely than are men to express some level of dissatisfaction with prospects for their professional future (Table 4B), but the “gender gap” here is just short of ten percentage points.

We are struck by the degree of expressed dissatisfaction about the state of Iranian Studies as a field, an outlook that appears to be very similar among the men and women in the sample (Table 4D). Men were more likely than women to say that they were somewhat satisfied with the state of Iranian Studies, while women—by a comparable margin—were more inclined than men to stake out a neutral stance on the state of the field. Identical percentages (31.3%) of men and women expressed some measure of dissatisfaction with the state of Iranian Studies as a field.

The relatively small gender differences found here are a bit at variance with the results of previous studies on professional satisfaction. One possible explanation is that earlier work has often found gender differences to be most pronounced in STEM fields, which are not represented in Iranian Studies. Another possible factor may be

**Table 4** Gender identity influences professional outlook

| [A] State of your career right now | Men   | Women |
|------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Very Satisfied                     | 45.8% | 34.4% |
| Somewhat Satisfied                 | 37.5% | 40.6% |
| Neutral                            | 6.3%  | 9.4%  |
| Somewhat Dissatisfied              | 4.2%  | 12.5% |
| Very Dissatisfied                  | 6.3%  | 3.1%  |
| ( <i>n</i> )                       | (48)  | (32)  |
| [B] Prospects professional future  | Men   | Women |
| Very Satisfied                     | 40.4% | 25.8% |
| Somewhat Satisfied                 | 27.7% | 38.7% |
| Neutral                            | 19.1% | 12.9% |
| Somewhat Dissatisfied              | 10.6% | 16.1% |
| Very Dissatisfied                  | 2.1%  | 6.5%  |
| ( <i>n</i> )                       | (47)  | (31)  |
| [C] Professional environment       | Men   | Women |
| Very Satisfied                     | 39.6% | 28.1% |
| Somewhat Satisfied                 | 33.3% | 34.4% |
| Neutral                            | 10.4% | 21.9% |
| Somewhat Dissatisfied              | 8.3%  | 15.6% |
| Very Dissatisfied                  | 8.3%  | –     |
| ( <i>n</i> )                       | (48)  | (32)  |
| [D] State of Iranian studies       | Men   | Women |
| Very Satisfied                     | –     | –     |
| Somewhat Satisfied                 | 45.8% | 31.3% |
| Neutral                            | 22.9% | 37.5% |
| Somewhat Dissatisfied              | 25.0% | 21.9% |
| Very Dissatisfied                  | 6.3%  | 9.4%  |
| ( <i>n</i> )                       | (48)  | (32)  |

that the challenges facing Iranian Studies in recent years—the often insecure state of area studies on many campuses, and the political ferment surrounding Iranian Studies—are sufficiently salient that they motivate a consensus that crosses lines of discipline, seniority, and gender.

### Gender and motivations for graduate study and research interests

Survey respondents were presented with lists of possible influences on their choice of graduate study and their current research interests. Respondents could select multiple items from the lists, and they had the opportunity to specify influences not included among the response options. Gender breakdowns are shown in

**Table 5** Factors influencing research

| [A] Choice of graduate study  | Men   | Women |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Social Identity               | 6.0%  | 16.7% |
| Intellectual Interest         | 94.0% | 86.1% |
| Undergraduate Study           | 12.0% | 19.4% |
| Economic Opportunity          | 2.0%  | 5.6%  |
| Career Goals                  | 18.0% | 13.9% |
| Social Impact                 | 16.0% | 27.8% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                  | (50)  | (36)  |
| [B] Current research interest | Men   | Women |
| Previous Research             | 64.0% | 63.9% |
| Funding Opportunities         | 12.0% | 11.1% |
| Ethic Identity                | 12.0% | 2.8%  |
| Gender Identity               | 4.0%  | 11.1% |
| Religious Identity            | 6.0%  | –     |
| Social Impact                 | 32.0% | 47.2% |
| ( <i>n</i> )                  | (50)  | (36)  |

Respondents could select more than one factor, so percentages in each column will not add up to 100%

Table 5. The overall profiles of influences specified by men and women are more similar than different, and the contrasts that are apparent do not achieve statistical significance. But those contrasts are nevertheless noteworthy, and they resonate with previous research on scholarly motivations.

As seen in Table 5A, intellectual interest was mentioned by most everyone—94% of men and 86% of women—as a factor in their choice of graduate study. In stark contrast, economic opportunity was mentioned by almost no one—2.0% of men and 5.6% of women. Neither set of figures should come as a surprise, especially the latter set.

Women were a bit more likely than men (27.8% vs. 16.0%) to identify social impact as an influence in their choice of graduate study. Although the gender gap here is not immense, it is noteworthy that close to 30% of women placed a priority on their scholarly pursuits having a social impact.

This priority is even stronger as an influence on current research interests (Table 5B). Nearly half of the female respondents (47.2%) mentioned social impact as an influence on current research interests. A substantial percentage of men (32.0%) also listed social impact. Aside from previous research, social impact was the most commonly mentioned motivator among both men and women, and the 15 percentage difference between men and women is the largest gap found in Table 5B.

Deeb and Winegar (2015) found a clear political consciousness underlying the scholarly pursuits of MENA scholars, a consciousness that was particularly evident among women trained in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Among subsequent generations

of MENA scholars, a connection between academic interests and political commitments was evident across gender.

We followed up on this observation with our own data, by further breaking down the contrasts shown in Table 5 by academic rank. The results are not shown here; the analysis strains our small sample, and in most cases, we have only a few respondents representing different combinations of gender and academic rank. But the patterns that we do find are suggestive, both confirming and updating Deeb and Winegar's observations. Take, for instance, the gender gap for mentions of social impact as a motivator for choice of graduate study. We found that gap to be wider among full and associate professors, consistent with the generational patterns found by Deeb and Winegar. At the same time, we also found a considerable gender gap among current graduate students in the mention of social impact. Again, this is based on a mere handful of survey respondents, but it we do wonder if the current political climate at the time of the survey was encouraging a consciousness or urgency that was influencing the academic interests of rising Iranian Studies scholars. And similar to the patterns of subfield interests summarized in Table 1, we wonder if there is a glimpse here of a future change in focus and priorities in the field of Iranian Studies.

## Conclusion and prospects for future research

The survey results reported here identified different professional experiences on the basis of gender and “region-related” ethnicity. Women in Iranian Studies in America academia were more likely to be of junior rank or graduate students. Women were more likely than men to feel that gender identity influenced their professional milestones. Women were more likely to list the desire for social impact as a professional motivation than men. Women tended to feel less sanguine about the state of their careers, their professional environment, their career prospects, and the state of the Iranian Studies field as a whole.

These findings raise a host of questions for further research. Do those differences translate into different epistemological patterns among these scholars? If so, do patterns emerge within the broader field of Iranian Studies, or, in parallel because other disciplinary or interdisciplinary scholarly networks are more welcoming to other lines of inquiry? What is the impact of Iranian Studies scholars who are in a position to train and mentor younger scholars? What is the impact of Iranian Studies on wider academic curricula? Does that connect to where Iranian Studies scholars find tenure-stream positions? The epistemological questions are probably best addressed through the writing of scholars themselves, but researchers might follow the lead of scholars like Zohreh T. Sullivan (2001) and interview academics to get a fuller sense of how their personal lives intersect with and inform their professional ones.

Oral histories and memoirs can further enrich our understanding of the personal and the professional among Iranian-American Iran specialists. But how relevant is the study of this “low incidence population” to the wider story of Iranian-Americans and the Iranian diaspora? How representative is the community of US-based Iranian-American Iranian Studies scholars of the Iranian-American community as a whole?



Our survey did probe other personal experiences—comparisons of their economic status growing up versus the present (i.e., 2016), highest level of education in Iran (as a proxy for immigration timing), use of Persian in different settings, and family life. Some suggestive results in our survey relate to three demographic features of Iranian-Americans noted in other research. Some of those findings are briefly noted here.

First, there are a range of ways Iranian-Americans self-identify and stay connected to Iran through Persian. In our survey, if a respondent went to high school in Iran, they tended to identify as Iranian or American, but not Iranian-American (which was the case for other levels of education completion in Iran). More women than men completed high school in Iran. Iranians and Iranian-Americans in our survey rarely use Persian in “non-professional settings” outside the home or in casual conversations “at work.” Women were a little more likely than men to use Persian at home or non-professional social settings outside the home. Those who identified as Iranian were nearly twice as likely to speak Persian at home compared to those who identified as Iranian-American (58.3% and 30% respectively). But both groups reported speaking Persian at home less than US census respondents 15 years earlier:

According to the 2000 US Census, Persian language ranked 18th among the 20 languages frequently spoken in US households. More recent ACS data reveal that 82% of first- and 45% of second-generation Iranians speak Persian at home. (Bozorgmehr and Meybodi 2016, 102).

Iranian Studies specialists—whether they consider themselves Iranian or Iranian-American—are less likely than Iranian immigrants generally to speak Persian at home. Whether this reflects the assimilative effects of being in American academia or some other factor is hard to say without further study. Prioritizing Persian language education and *access* to Persian language education were important factors in Persian retention in (Bozorgmehr and Meybodi, 104–14). Iranian Studies scholars are not necessarily concentrated in areas where access to Persian language education is available for their children.

Second, in terms of marital status and income, our survey results suggest some similarity with of our academics and the broader population of Iranian-Americans. Men in our survey were more likely to be married and have children than women. Women and men were more similar than not in reporting their progress on a “socio-economic” ladder (comparing their present circumstances to when they grew up), with men reporting slightly lower “starting” points than women. Self-identified “Americans” reported lower starting points than Iranian or Iranian-Americans. This suggests that Iranian-American academics are more like the majority of Iranian-Americans who report incomes of \$50,000 or higher (82%) and who have a college degree or higher (86%, Zogby 2020, 12).

Third, and returning to the issue of cultural similarity, nearly equal proportions of women and men in our survey (70.3% and 72.1%, respectively) reported being raised in some religious tradition. Those proportions declined noticeably in adulthood for both men and women, although women were more likely than men to state a current religious identification (40.5% compared to 31%). The largest religious group growing up was “Muslim” (31.9 and 33.3%, respectively, for men and women).

This is comparable to the number of Iranian-Americans generally. The PAAIA 2020 National Opinion Survey in 2020 found that 36% of Iranian-Americans identified as Muslim (Zogby 2020, 12). The largest current religious identification for respondents in our survey was “No Religious Tradition” (37.8% and 43.8%, respectively, for men and women). Again, this is a little higher than the 30% of Iranian-Americans in the PAAIA survey who selected “agnostic” (12%), “atheist” (7%), and “other religion” (11%), but arguably comparable.

All this taken together, we think our results on gender and professional experience among Iranian-American Iran specialists are worth exploring in other professional and socio-economic subsets of Iranian-Americans and Iranian-Americans more generally. There is much left to be learned, both through follow-up survey research, as well as more intensive interviewing. In the years since the 2016 survey, several significant events have occurred that could impact the professional experiences of Iran specialists and their attitudes. First, as noted earlier, the Association for Iranian Studies implemented a Diversity and Inclusion policy in 2019 that impacted conference organization and outreach for leadership positions in AIS. Second, worsening relations between the USA and Iran had two disruptive effects on Iranian-Americans generally and, therefore, could also impact the professional priorities of Iran specialists in the USA. The implementation of the “Muslim Ban” from 2017 to 2021, for example, put Iranian-born graduate students in a precarious situation. The tightening of sanctions on Iran in 2018 as the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (also known as the “Iran Nuclear Deal”) would have hindered those Iranian-Americans with transnational families from supporting each other financially or traveling to visit one another. The vulnerability of diaspora-based academics to being detained in Iran may also have impacted scholarly activity and research plans. Third, the lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on life and academia in the USA is only beginning to be assessed. Were Iran specialists insulated from those effects or did they perceive differential impacts? That might find expression in their current attitudes about the field generally and their expectations about their careers. Are the gendered differences in pandemic impacts in American society, academic life playing out differently among members of this scholarly community? As we look to develop an updated survey on these issues in 2022, we will have the benefit of insights accorded us by the 2016 survey which gave us a snapshot of the field before all these developments came to pass.

## Appendix A: text of survey questions used in analysis

Full text of survey questionnaire available at: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/11Yb-7p7YgRDxEp2pjO4wO2ESx6TIU4up?usp=sharing>.

Q2.1 Please select the fields that best describe the research you do now (select all that apply)

Iranian History, 1800–present.

Iranian History, 1500–1800.

Iranian History, Early Islamic Period to 1500.

Iranian History, Pre-Islamic.  
 Modern Persian Literature.  
 Traditional Persian Literature (Post-Islam).  
 Pre-Islamic Iranian Literature/Culture.  
 Persian Language Pedagogy.  
 Middle East Studies.  
 Iranian Studies.  
 Gender Studies.  
 Sociology.  
 Religious Studies.  
 Other (please specify).

Q2.8 What is your current academic rank?

Non-Tenured Instructor/Adjunct Professor.  
 Tenure-Stream Assistant Professor (or equivalent).  
 Tenured Associate Professor.  
 Tenured Professor.  
 Research Faculty (Non-Tenured).  
 Academic Staff (e.g., Library).  
 Graduate Instructor or Teaching Assistant.  
 Other.  
 Retired.

Q4.1 Please select the single ethnic heritage that best describes you.<sup>4</sup>

Iranian.  
 American.  
 Iranian-American.  
 Other (specify).

Q4.7 To which gender identity do you most identify?

Male.  
 Female.  
 Transgender Male.  
 Transgender Female.  
 Gender Variant/Non-Conforming.  
 Other.  
 Prefer Not to Answer.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that this question was followed up by several refining questions on ethnic heritage and religious identification. Both “Iranian” and “American” are categories that subsume a lot of diversity and a couple of respondents actually took issue with the wording of the question (although they answered it). But, our study was intended to query if identifying as Iranian or Iranian-American had an impact on professional experience in a field devoted to the study of Iran.

Q5.7 How do you think your gender identity influenced the following professional milestones:

| A Great Deal<br>None at All | A Lot | A Moderate Amount | A Little |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------------------|----------|
|-----------------------------|-------|-------------------|----------|

Acceptance to Graduate School.  
 Level of Funding Received in Graduate School.  
 Ability to Obtain an Academic Position.  
 Salary Negotiations at Time of Hire Promotion.  
 Opportunities for Academic Leadership Positions.  
 Ability to Publish.

Q 5.12 How do you feel about ...

| Very<br>Satisfied | Somewhat<br>Satisfied | Neutral | Somewhat<br>Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------|--------------------------|--------------|
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------|--------------------------|--------------|

The state of your career right now.  
 The prospects for your professional future.  
 The professional environment where you work.  
 The state of Iranian Studies as a field.

Q5.1 Which factors influenced your choice of graduate study? (select all that apply)

Social Identity.  
 Intellectual Interest.  
 Undergraduate Study.  
 Economic Opportunity.  
 Career Goals.  
 Desire to Have Social Impact.  
 Other (specify).

Q5.2 Which factors influenced your current research interest? (select all that apply)

Previous Research.  
 Funding Opportunities.  
 Ethnic Identity.  
 Gender Identity.  
 Religious Identity.  
 Desire to Have Social Impact.  
 Other (specify).

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**Author contributions** Both authors developed the survey and reviewed data collaboratively. JB prepared the tables and evaluated results for statistical significance. CMA interpreted the results in the context of the academic literature on Iranian Studies, Middle East Studies, and Iranian Diaspora Studies. Both authors reviewed the literature on gender and ethnic bias in US academia and evaluated the results accordingly. Conclusions and discussions were written collaboratively.

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**Data availability** The aggregate, anonymized data from the survey are available upon request to either author.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** Authors have no financial interests connected to this research or results.

**Ethical research** The survey was judged “exempt not regulated” by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board on October 6, 2016 [eResearch ID: HUM00114712] but still bound by the principles of Belmont Report for ethical research. All data collected were anonymized and reported in aggregate form with no individual information included. The survey instrument itself advised respondents of the intended use of the survey data.

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